

Mental Health Assessments with Deaf Auslan Users Not as Simple as it May Seem

An accurate diagnosis is crucial for every mental health professional and is the cornerstone to appropriate service provision and treatment.

When assessing a Deaf Auslan user, what does the assessor need to have?

In addition to appropriate qualifications in mental health, an effective clinical assessment of Deaf people requires the assessor to have:

- an extensive knowledge of Deaf culture and community, including historical factors
- fluency in Auslan (Australian Sign Language)



Can't I use an interpreter?

The challenge when undertaking an assessment – as opposed to ongoing treatment and therapy – through an interpreter is that you, as the mental health professional, do not have access directly to the communication. The interpreter may not recognise and convey subtle aspects of the Deaf client's communication, affect and language use which are crucial for you to arrive at an accurate diagnosis.

Certainly there are trained and highly skilled interpreters who work within the mental health sector, but regardless of how well they understand the process and can work collegially with you, the fact remains that you do not have full and direct access to the client's communication and presentation in order to assess it.

Why is this important?

"Misdiagnoses have been common. Mental illness may be missed because abnormal behaviour is attributed to the patient's deafness (Denmark and Eldridge, 1969). Alternatively, a deaf person's frustration in communication released as an 'explosive reaction' may be mistaken for evidence of mental illness (Denmark, 1966)." (Hinkley and Kitson, Mental Health and Deafness, 2000).

"... language deprivation deserves investigation as language difficulties complicate diagnosis and treatment of many deaf patients. There is a need to help clinicians to differentiate primary and secondary contributors to deaf patients' mental health issues." (Hall, Levin & Anderson, Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology, 2017 June; 52(6): 761-776).

What can we offer you?

Karli Health Centre is able to provide mental health assessments to Deaf clients who have funds within their NDIS plans or to clients who are able to pay privately.

Assessments are undertaken by a qualified Registered Psychiatric Nurse – Division 1 who has extensive experience in working with the Deaf communities in both the United Kingdom and Australia. He is a fluent sign language user.